NAPOLEON PAINTED BY HIMSELF.

From Putnam's Magazine.

Probably the truth of the familiar saying that a reputation cannot be assailed by any other man so successfully as by its owner; in other words, that a man, when he fairly sets about it, can "write himself down" faster and more effectually than any other man can do the work for him—was never more signally shown than in the recent publication of "Napoleon's Correspondence" by order of Louis Napoleon.

The object of the latter personage was, of course, the glorification, generally, of 'mon oncle;" though he may have thought that the rays of the halo thus evoked would extend to and include the great captain's successor in office. At any rate, the faith of the nephew in the impeccability of the uncle was exemplary, touching, and supreme—as is effectually made obvious by the fact, not only of his ordering the publication, but of his directing the members of the Commission who superintend the publishing, to "make no alteration, suppression, or modification of the texts."

The thirteen originally appointed Commissioners pursued their task with great diligence. In the space of six years—from 1858 to 1864—they published no less than fifteen large, closely printed octavo volumes. They performed their task, also, with great fidelity—indeed, with too much fidelity; for, in 1864, the master of ceremonies found it necessary to supersede them by a new Commission of six members, of whom Prince Napoleon was the chief; who were instructed to publish only what the Emperor himself would have made public, had he lived long enough to be his own publisher.

On the subject of this change of editorship, the *Edinburgh Review*, in a masterly and—as far as it goes—an exhaustive article, of which we make free use as we write, remarks:—

If any surprise was felt by the public, it was caused, not by the measure itself, but by the fact of its having been so long delayed. Had the situation of the French press been different, had there existed in France any of those sure and prompt means for testing public opinion which free countries afford, there can be little doubt that the knowledge of the impression produced by the publication of this correspondence would have quickly dispelled the delusions of those who flattered themselves that they were raising a monument to the glory of the founder of the Bonaparte dynasty. No pamphleteer, however hostile, could have produced a work half so damaging to the reputation of the imperial hero; no libeller, however unscrupulous, would have dared to invent some of the letters which have thus been given to the world in the blindness of political idolatry. But it was long before the effect on the public outside the Imperialist atmosphere could be appreciated, and in the meantime fifteen volumes had been published. The work was expensive and quite beyond the reach of popular readers; it was long and filled up in a great measure with administrative and military matters which deterred indolent minds accustomed to the light food of smart chronicles and lively *causeries*. Newspapers and reviews were afraid to tread on such dangerous ground, and withheld their criticism; in a word, the correspondence, all things considered, was little read and still less spoken of. Now and then a political writer, bolder than the rest, would quote some startling passage to show the evils of uncontrolled power and the dangers of excessive centralization, but without daring to add a commentary. So the work proceeded rapidly and noiselessly, watched and appreciated only by a select few. It was half completed before its most zealous promoters had found out that their pious efforts had resulted in the most complete and irrefragable collection of accusing testimony that any one man was ever made to furnish against himself.

Among the strange things connected with Napoleon's career, one of the most strange is the fact that, after a legion of authors have endeavored to set the world right as to the character of the first Emperor of the French, and, in their varied efforts, have represented him in all the phases intermediate between a demon and a deity; leaving the real question, like the authorship of Junius, in such a confused state that its solution seemed to be hopeless; the hero of all these "Lives" should himself have dispelled the fog of uncertainty, and, with his own hand, have rendered a decision of the disputed point in such indisputable terms that dissent, on the part of any intelligent man who will read what is written, is simply impossible.

Hitherto, any man, according to his prejudices or his convictions, might adopt or reject any of Napoleon's "characters," as found in the pages of the Emperor's self-constituted biographers, on the ground that "that is the English view of the case," or "the Prussian," or "the French," and so on. As if any one was necessarily less or more correct than any other because its origin was known. As if an anonymous Life of Napoleon might be more credible because its origin was unknown. But now we have a record which is no man's "view;" which is neither history nor biography as produced by a third person, but is a posthumous confession of the hero himself. It is a photograph taken from the living subject; and, whether flattering or damning, it is mathematically accurate in every line and feature. The most abject and devoted of Napoleon's worshippers must admit that this picture is correct, or that the god of their idolatry misrepresents himself: for it is his own handiwork.

The period of time included in the fifteen volumes of the first Commission, is about sixteen years—from the latter part of October, 1793, to the end of August, 1809; that is, from Napoleon's twenty-fourth to his fortieth year. As one may say, from his majority to his maturity—from the commencement of his public life to the highest flight of his imperial power.

The contents of these fifteen volumes of "Correspondence" are not, however, merely letters. Proclamations, messages to the Directory on public affairs, civil as well as military; bulletins; a variety of official documents; not necessarily written by Napoleon, though bearing his signature and issued by his authority; these, and a mass of miscellanies of less importance, help to fill the books; but of letters there are enough. Enough of such as Napoleon "would not have made public, had he lived long enough to be his own publisher," to substantiate what his adversaries have alleged against him; and also enough on matters purely military to justify the intensified praise of even Thiers himself. This latter result was, indeed, hardly needed. The world has long been divided on the question of Napoleon's character; but there is little diversity of opinion as to his military genius.

The various estimates of his character, apart from his qualities as a soldier, owe their existence, mainly, to the credulity or incredulity of men as to the facts of his career; on which subject, the testimony of historians is hopelessly conflicting. But it is remarkable that on some points about which the witnesses agree as to the facts, the public voice is still diametrically divided between censure and praise. What many men regard as despicable in Napoleon, others hold to be a proof of his greatness. For example, a portion of the readers of this correspondence will concur with the Commissioners when they say—in that inflated style which none but Frenchmen ever attain—

What most surprises one in this correspondence, is the impression it gives of the universal and powerful mind which embraced every thing; and which could, with equal facility, rise to the most sublime conceptions and descend to the most trifling details. Now soaring above the world, Napoleon marks out the limits of new states; and, anon, he concentrates his solicitude on the humblest hamlet of his empire.

For our own part, we find nothing "surprising" in all that; and, as the Commissioners claim for the object of their panegyric little less than supernatural qualities, it is superfluous *for them* to be surprised at his capacity for details. But that is only a partial statement of this matter of detail. Not only did Napoleon mark out new States and supervise hamlets; but, as the reviewer before us says,

"At the very zenith of his power, with one half of Europe under his rule and the other half in arms against him, he concocted little police plots, planned scurrilous pamphlets for literary hirelings, suggested caricatures which he thought might be telling against his enemies, found time for ordering of fetes and monuments, read reports of the chitchat of the *salons* of Paris, and, with great pride in his superior vigilance, himself denounced their intrigues to his mortified Minister of Police. This activity might have been admired had it been successful; but, unfortunately, the pamphlet, the caricature, and the monument designed by the imperial meddler were generally bad. In spite of his police and counter-police, his empire was so insecure that—as was shown by the momentary success of the Malet conspiracy—its very existence was at the mercy of a handful of resolute men. Neither literature nor art, neither trade nor agriculture, throve under his unvarying and stifling solicitude. In France, all was done by the Government; and all, or almost all, was ill done."

All this certainly shows a capacity for detail, but there is nothing in it to command respect, and surely nothing to warrant panegyric. It indicates littleness, not greatness, of character. At the same time, it indicates mere littleness; it involves no moral dereliction, properly so called. But as the investigation proceeds, the colors deepen and the character grows dark.

Napoleon was one of the few men who spring, *per saltum*, to a full and complete development, without toiling through the intermediate stages of learning, experience, and progress. In all things, except, indeed, the possession of unlimited power—for, up to that time, he was not independent of the Directory—he was the same man at the beginning of his campaigns in Italy, as he was at the peace of Tilsit. From the moment of his crossing the Alps he had nothing to learn in the art of war, and nothing to acquire in the "science" of rapine, violence, and deceit. As the wars thrust upon Italy, Egypt, Spain, etc., were in the gross, gratuitous, wanton, unprovoked aggressions on innocent and helpless people; so were the details of those wars marked by reckless and unscrupulous barbarity. The lives, property, and private rights of inoffensive citizens were treated severally and collectively, as if they belonged to Napoleon by right of inheritance. Nothing was spared, which an ill-grasping general coveted, or a rapacious soldiery could destroy. Private mansions, as well as "humble hamlets" and villages, were burned for pastime; prisoners were butchered in cold blood; and, in short, *all* the demons of war were impressed into the service of this ferocious conqueror, to be set loose at the close of every victory.

The *animus* of all this is foreshadowed in Napoleon's first proclamation to the army of Italy:—

Soldiers, you are naked and ill fed. France owes you much but can give you nothing. I will lead you to the most fertile plains of the world. Wealthy provinces and great towns will be in your power; you will reap honor, glory, and riches, etc. etc.

As a fitting commentary on this promise of general pillage, the great devastator writes after his first battle:—

The furious excesses of my half-starved soldiers are enough to make humanity blush.

And two days later he says:

There is less pillage. The first thirst of an army destitute of everything has been slaked. The poor wretches are excusable. After sighing for the promised land for three years, they have at last reached it and wish to enjoy it.

Among his orders about private property, is this:—

Tax the lord of Arquata 50,000 livres. In default of payment, raze his house to the ground and lay his land waste. He is a furious oligarch, an enemy of France and of the army.

After a time, the casualties of even successful war having reduced the number of his troops, he writes to the Directory that he has already sent them twenty millions of francs in money wrung from the Italians; and that if they will send him thirty thousand more men, he will be able to produce out of the yet unconquered States, twice that sum in money, besides innumerable treasures in the way of works of art, jewelry, museum collections, and whatever other trifles might be scraped together by his skilful marauders.

In Egypt, this game of pillage could not be played to much purpose on account of the poverty of the people; therefore, the deficiency was made up with heads. After the first punishment of the revolters at Cairo had been inflicted with a barbarity that would be incredible, did not the correspondence attest it, Napoleon ordered all the prisoners to be beheaded. Soon after that he writes that "order is now re-established in Cairo. Every night we cut off thirty heads. I think this will be a good lesson to them." We have here, also, Napoleon's own order for the massacre of the two thousand Jaffa prisoners.

This system of governing a conquered people by means of "good lessons," continued to be one of Napoleon's favorites during his whole career. In 1806, after making his brother Joseph a present of the kingdom of Naples, he writes:—

The fate of your reign depends on your conduct when you return to Calabria. There must be no forgiveness. Shoot at least six hundred rebels. They have murdered more soldiers than that. Burn the houses of thirty of the principal persons in the villages, and distribute their property among the soldiers. Take away all arms from the inhabitants, and give up to pillage five or six of the large villages. When Piacenza rebelled, I ordered Junot to burn two villages, and shoot the chiefs, among whom were six priests. It will be some time before they rebel again.

A week later he writes:—

I wish the rabble at Naples would revolt, Until you make an example you will not be master. I should consider an insurrection in Naples in the same light as a father of a family would regard the small-pox for his children, provided it did not weaken the invalid too much.

Does any curious reader pause to inquire "Who were these Italians and Egyptians, to whom these *good lessons* were so freely administered?" Alas! they were peaceable, harmless, ignorant people, the greater part of whom had never heard the name of their destroyer until they heard the sound of his guns; who owed him and France no more allegiance than we owe to Theodorus of Abyssinia; and over whom he and France had no more right of control than the King of the Fejee Islands has over the British Parliament. The relative rights of the parties were precisely those which exist between the passengers and crew of a merchantman when their ship is boarded by a band of pirates.

Does any curious reader inquire, further, under what pretext Napoleon assumed the right to administer these "good lessons?" The pretext was the battle-cry of liberty, equality, and fraternity; and this was paraphrased in the proclamations, which promised the destruction of tyranny and the liberation of the people, wherever the liberating army carried its victories. After this fashion, Piedmont, Lombardy, Parma, Modena, and Venice were "liberated;" and before marching on Rome with the same philanthropic purpose Napoleon proclaimed that,

"In order to reassure the people, it is necessary to let them know that we are their friends, and particularly the friends of the descendants of the Brutuses, the Scipios, and of the other great men whom we have taken for our models."

Yet, with commendable candor, he at the same time wrote to the Directory that, if they would send him plenty of reinforcements,

"Rome, Trieste, and even a part of the kingdom of Naples, will become our *prey*;"

which, indeed, they did, in due time. Napoleon's shameless duplicity in his dealings with the Pope—writing to him the most respectful and conciliatory letters, and, at the same time, in his letters to the Directory, exulting over the exactions he was about to levy on his Holiness—is fully exposed in this correspondence. He says, among other things:—

"In my opinion, when Rome is deprived of Bologna, Ferrara, Romagna, and the thirty millions we take from her, she cannot exist; the old machine will tumble to pieces of itself."

We cannot pursue this subject, because, however interesting it is inexhaustible. We have said enough to call to the correspondence the attention of those who can gain access to it, and who have the leisure and the inclination to study it. To others we recommend a careful reading of the Edinburgh *Review* for October, 1867, from which we make this concluding extract:—

As regards the man himself, the dominant impression that will be left on the reader's mind, will, we think, be of that meanness—of moral littleness, strangely combined with great strength of will and unrivalled activity of mind. Napoleon was in truth an actor, and in his correspondence we view him from behind the scenes. The vulgar applause of the multitude can no longer deceive those who know his history as it is there written with his own hand. His duplicity, his bombast, and mock heroism, his studied violence, his love of false grandeur, his envy in the midst of unrivalled greatness, his hatred and distrust of all that was really good and great, his vulgar arrogance, his indifference to the sufferings of others, his selfish and insensate ambition, are conspicuous in every page. This greatest of modern conquerors was not a hero, for the great soul, the magnanimity, which alone makes heroes, he never possessed.